

## Entre Amigos – Opinion/Commentary

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### John Paul II, the pilgrim pope who inspired a generation

By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

Pope John Paul II keeps filling stadiums and squares years after his death. On April 2, 70,000 Mexicans filled up the *Estadio Azteca* (the massive soccer stadium in Mexico City) to pay tribute to the beloved pope who visited the country five times. After all, Mexicans don't forget that his first pastoral visit as a pope in January 1979 was to Mexico, after a stop in the Dominican Republic. And that it was there, in front of their *Virgencita de Guadalupe*, that he consecrated his pontificate to her and decided that he had to be a pilgrim pope.

In 1999, John Paul II also promulgated the celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe as a feast day of the Church in all the Americas and referred to her as the “Star of the First and the New Evangelization.”

At the recent tribute in Mexico City, the multitude chanted and cheered every time famous phrases from John Paul's visits were repeated or projected on the screen. Phrases such as “*México siempre fiel*” (Mexico, always faithful), “*Me voy pero no me voy*” (I am leaving but I am not leaving [you]), and “*Mexico sabe bailar, pero también sabe rezar, y más que todo gritar*” (Mexico knows how to dance, but also knows how to pray and above else how to shout.) The man knew how to work a crowd!

It seems everybody has an anecdote to tell about John Paul II. This is a testimony to the impact that the globe-trotting, long-reigning, charismatic pope from Poland had on the lives of so many, particularly those of my generation who grew up not knowing any other pope but him.

In 1989, I was a young journalism student who traveled to Rome to participate at a university congress. I was fortunate enough to get tickets to the Easter Vigil at St. Peter's Basilica. After a beautiful and awe inspiring liturgy, I ran to position myself on the side alley that leads to the sacristy, through which the pope would process out. I was a woman with a mission: to take a picture of the pope as close as possible. As he turned around the corner imparting his blessings left and right, I prepared to shoot as soon as he turned my way. Then, something happened. Through the camera's lens, I saw him looking directly at me. I lowered the camera and, for a split second, our eyes crossed. He moved on but I was still paralyzed, and ended up not taking the treasured picture. I remember his gaze as if it were yesterday. His eyes irradiated a profound peace but, at the same time, they projected a playful smile, as if telling me “Be good now.” The pope's eyes captivated me and they opened in me a curiosity about him and what he had to say.

As a journalism student, I was also fascinated by John Paul's II interaction with media. He knew of the power of media to evangelize and did not hesitate to cultivate a relationship with them. He was, in the words of Sister Mary Ann Walsh, RSM “made for TV.”

His love for youth, and the way he was able to connect with them were absolutely remarkable too. My husband was a young pilgrim at WYD 1993 in Denver. He often tells me how special it

was for him. “No matter how close or far away you were to the stage, you felt like he was talking personally to you,” he says. Of all the pope’s messages he especially remembers his “Do not be afraid!” words of encouragement that meant so much at that stage in his life.

It is difficult to summarize all that John Paul II did and meant to us: his tireless defense of human life and dignity; the way in which he made the Gospel and himself present to the people of every continent and nation; his profound thought about mankind and what troubles it today. In the end, his message was always the same: Christ is the answer!

Perhaps seasoned journalist John Thavis summed it up well in his obituary for the former pope: “Pope John Paul II was a voice of conscience for the world and a modern-day apostle for his church. To both roles he brought a philosopher's intellect, a pilgrim's spiritual intensity and an actor's flair for the dramatic. That combination made him one of the most forceful moral leaders of the modern age.”

No matter what, however, let us remember that the man who canonized more saints than all of his predecessors combined is being declared now “blessed” by the Church not because of his accomplishments, political influence or management style, but because of the sanctity of his life.

His words and actions inspired a generation to open wide the doors to Christ. He made us question ourselves and invited us to lead better lives, to make room for Christ and invite others to do the same.

On May 1, John Paul II will fill St. Peter’s Square again. With all the pilgrims, my heart is chanting in the distance: “¡Juan Pablo Segundo, te quisio, te quiere, todo el mundo!” (John Paul II, we loved, we still love, you).

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